PATTERNS OF POWER · A THEORETICAL STATEMENT

The Two Legs

Why the exploit has two halves and not one — how scale destroyed both the ability to see and the ability to act, why exposing a captured institution therefore changes almost nothing, and why every institution that constrains power is a prosthesis for a limb civilisation amputated

Companion to *The Necessary Seam and The Custodian's Dilemma*

Thomas J. Bryan

with Claude (Anthropic) · 2026

held as tested, not revealed

Why the Exploit Has Two Halves and Not One — How Scale Destroyed Both the Ability to See and the Ability to Act, Why Exposing a Captured Institution Therefore Changes Almost Nothing, and Why Every Institution That Has Ever Constrained Power Is a Prosthesis for a Limb Civilization Amputated

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Preface

This paper begins from a finding and then breaks it in half.

The finding, developed across the papers that precede this one, is that advanced civilizations exhibit the same structure of exploitation everywhere: a small governing class holds a vast population cheaply and durably, resting on a floor of force but operating mainly through managed belief. The reason, we concluded, is the **division of knowing** — that in any society complex enough to require a division of labour, knowing itself divides, because no mind can hold or check more than a sliver of what the society runs on, so that every person is forced to trust knowers he cannot verify. That forced trust opens a **seam** between the many and the knowledge they cannot reach, and whoever stands in the seam holds a power that owes nothing to his virtue and everything to his location.

We arrived there by a specific route, and the route is worth naming because it disciplined the conclusion. **The pattern has a boundary.** It holds across every advanced civilization we examined and *it breaks down below them* — among band-scale foragers, where the same human beings, with the same cognitive architecture and the same appetites, somehow do not produce the same result. A theory that explains everything explains nothing. A theory that fails in a *predictable place* is doing real work, because the place where it fails tells you what the operative variable is. The variable was not human wickedness, which does not vary by scale. It was something that does.

That was right. But it was incomplete, and this paper is the correction.

Ask precisely why the pattern breaks down below the threshold, and you find that the band was protected by two things, not one.

The first is the one we named: **in a small world you can check.** The cue and the competence are bound together; you watched the man earn his standing; you know whether his cures work.

The second we did not name, and it is at least as important: **in a small world you can also cheaply gang up on whoever tries to seize the seam.** The anthropological record is emphatic on this point, and it is the opposite of the sentimental picture. Foragers are not egalitarian because they lack the appetite to dominate. They have it. It is *suppressed* — deliberately, continuously, and at some cost — by coalitions of the rank and file who mock, shame, shun, and in the extreme case kill the man who starts behaving like a chief.

So the band had **sight** and it had **strength**: the capacity to see what was being done to it, and the capacity to act on what it saw.

And scale destroys **both**, from the same cause, at the same time.

That is this paper's thesis, and its practical consequence is severe. If the exploit had only one leg — if the problem were merely that people cannot see — then transparency, exposure, journalism, and education would be a cure. **They are not a cure, and the reason is not that people are stupid or apathetic. The reason is that seeing and acting are different capacities, destroyed by different mechanisms, and restoring one does nothing whatever for the other.** This is why the exposures land, and the outrage is real, and the structure does not move.

The framework is Thomas Bryan's. The research, verification, scholarly placement, and composition are Claude's, an AI system made by Anthropic. This paper stands alone: every term is defined, every scholar introduced, every quotation verified and explained.

The Argument in Brief

Part I — The Boundary as Evidence. Why the breakdown of the pattern at small scale is the most valuable fact we have, and what it forces us to look for.

Part II — What the Band Actually Had. The anthropological record, correctly read. Egalitarianism is not innocence; it is *work*. Christopher Boehm's "reverse dominance hierarchy," the !Kung practice of "insulting the meat," and the leveling mechanisms by which the many hold down the one.

Part III — The First Leg: Sight. Verification in a small world, its death by the division of labour, and its formal statement in economics as *rational ignorance*.

Part IV — The Second Leg: Strength. The capacity to act on what you see, and the three separate mechanisms by which scale destroys it: Mancur Olson's free-rider problem, Michael Chwe's common-knowledge requirement, and Timur Kuran's preference falsification.

Part V — One Cause, Two Deaths. Why this is not a coincidence: the same variable, scale, kills both legs, and does so through the same underlying fact.

Part VI — Why Exposure Changes Almost Nothing. The practical payload. Exposure restores sight and does nothing for strength — which is why 2008 changed the ratings industry so little, and why "transparency" is the most over-prescribed and under-performing remedy in political life.

Part VII — The Threshold. What actually flips a society from one regime to the other: storage, surplus, and the material conditions that make both legs unaffordable.

Part VIII — The Prosthesis. The reframe. Every institution that has ever meaningfully constrained power — science, courts, a free press, opposition parties, unions — is an *artificial reconstruction of one or both amputated legs*. None of them works by producing virtuous people. All of them work by installing rivals whose interests conflict.

Part IX — Why the Prosthesis Is Always Captured. The prosthesis is itself a seam, and seams get occupied. This is not a reason to despair; it is a reason to expect maintenance.

Part X — The Diagnostic. A two-column test for any proposed reform: does it restore sight, strength, or both? Most restore only one, and therefore fail.

Part XI — The Honest Ledger. Why this is not solvable, not stable, and also not fixed — and why the difference between those three is most of what we mean by liberty.

PART I

The Boundary as Evidence

One — A Theory That Fails Somewhere

The single most useful fact about the pattern of elite exploitation is that **it has a floor.**

Across the great agrarian civilizations — Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, India, Mesoamerica, Rome, medieval Europe — the same structure appears, again and again, in societies with no contact and no common ancestry: a small class at the top, a vast population below, and between them an apparatus of belief that makes the arrangement feel natural to those it costs the most. The recurrence across unconnected civilizations is what makes the pattern a *pattern* rather than a story about a particular culture.

And then you look below them — at band-scale hunter-gatherers, at the societies that describe the overwhelming majority of the human career on this planet — and **the structure is not there.** Not attenuated. Not gentler. *Structurally absent*: no permanent elite, no institutionalized authority, no class that lives on the labour of others.

This is the boundary, and it must be treated as evidence rather than as a curiosity, because of what it rules out.

Two — What the Boundary Rules Out

It rules out human nature as the explanation. The people in the band are the same animal. Same brain, same drives, same appetites for status and advantage. If exploitation flowed simply from human wickedness, it would appear at every scale, and it does not.

And it rules out the reverse fantasy just as firmly. The people in the band are *not* better. They are not noble savages, they are not free of the desire to dominate, and — as Part II will show — the anthropological record is emphatic that they suppress domination only through *continuous effort*. Remove the effort and the hierarchy comes straight back.

So what changed at the threshold was not the animal. **It was the animal's situation.** And the task is to identify precisely what a small society *has* that a large one does not — because that thing, whatever it is, is the load-bearing defence, and its loss is the exploit.

We previously identified one such thing. This paper's contention is that there were two.

PART II

What the Band Actually Had

One — The Myth of Effortless Equality

The romantic picture of forager life imagines a people so naturally cooperative that dominance never occurs to them. The anthropological record says something far more interesting and far more useful.

The central figure here is **Christopher Boehm**, an American evolutionary anthropologist whose 1999 book *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* is the landmark treatment. Boehm surveyed a large sample of egalitarian societies — his cross-cultural analysis covers on the order of four dozen — and reached a conclusion that inverts the sentimental view entirely.

Foragers, he found, are **not** egalitarian because they lack dominance instincts. They are apes; they have them. Egalitarianism among them is not a *default* but an *achievement* — a condition actively produced and continuously maintained by the group against the standing tendency of individuals to try to rise above it.

The mechanism Boehm names is the paper's second leg, and it is worth stating precisely. In a normal primate dominance hierarchy — the kind visible in every one of our ape relatives — **a few individuals dominate the many.** What foragers construct is the inversion: **the many act in concert to suppress the few.** Boehm calls this the **reverse dominance hierarchy**.

It is not the absence of a hierarchy. It is a hierarchy pointed the other way.

Two — The Tools

The instruments of the reverse dominance hierarchy are graduated, and they escalate:

Ridicule and teasing, applied the moment someone begins to swagger;

- **Gossip**, which coordinates the group's assessment of the offender without any formal proceeding;
- **Refusal and non-cooperation**;
- **Shunning** — the group behaving as though the man does not exist, which in a world where you cannot survive alone is a sentence of extraordinary weight;
- **Desertion** — the band simply walking away from a leader who has become overbearing, which is available only because the band has nothing it cannot carry;
- and, in the extreme case, **execution** — the group deputizing someone, often a kinsman of the offender to limit feud, to kill a man who has become intolerable.

Note the shape of this list. It is a ladder of sanctions of *increasing* severity, applied by a coalition, at low cost to each participant, against an individual. That is a functioning enforcement system, and it exists in societies with no state, no law, no police, and no formal authority of any kind.

Three — Insulting the Meat

The best-known illustration comes from the anthropologist **Richard Lee**, who spent years among the Ju/'hoansi (!Kung) of the Kalahari in the 1960s. Lee, wishing to thank the band at Christmas, bought the largest, fattest ox he could find — and was astonished when the !Kung, on inspecting his magnificent gift, responded with a stream of derision: a bag of bones, a scrawny thing, barely worth the trouble of butchering.

He eventually asked a !Kung man named /Tomazo why they did this, and the answer he received is one of the most instructive sentences in the anthropological literature. The behaviour, /Tomazo explained, was directed against **arrogance**:

> *"When a young man kills much meat, he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this."*

The practice — which the ethnographers came to call **"insulting the meat"** — is not rudeness and it is not envy. It is *maintenance*. The !Kung ridicule every successful hunter's kill, as a matter of routine, precisely *because* the successful hunter is the person at risk of becoming a big man, and the big man is the seed of the thing they will not have.

They are performing, deliberately and with full awareness of what they are doing, an act of **preventive levelling**. They are keeping a would-be captor out of the seam. And /Tomazo's explanation shows that they know exactly why.

Four — The Two Legs, Named

Now put this beside the other capacity the band possessed, and the structure of the argument appears.

Leg One: SIGHT. In a band of fifty known people, you can *see* what is happening. You watched the healer's patients recover or die. You watched the hunter succeed or fail. The mark and the merit have not come apart, because you are close enough to check them against each other. Knowledge is not yet divided into specialties you must take on faith.

Leg Two: STRENGTH. And if you see a man trying to make himself a chief, you can *act* — cheaply, immediately, and effectively. Ridicule costs you nothing. Gossip costs you nothing. Shunning costs you nothing. And crucially, **you know that everyone else sees it too**, because everyone is right there, and so you know that if you mock him, others will join, and you will not be left standing alone against a powerful man.

The band could see, and the band could act. These are two different capacities. And a great deal follows from the fact that civilization destroyed them separately.

PART III

The First Leg: Sight

One — How It Dies

This is the leg identified in the earlier work, and it needs only brief restatement here.

A complex society requires a **division of labour** — the potter does not farm, the smith does not weave, the physician does not build bridges. And the division of labour forces, as its inescapable shadow, a **division of knowing**: because the potter's knowledge is not the smith's, and no one can hold it all.

The consequence is that in an advanced society **every person is a layman about almost everything.** You did not verify the bridge, the medicine, the accounts, the airline's maintenance, the historical account, or the economic statistic. You could not. Nor could the most brilliant and sceptical person alive, because the limit is not intelligence but *finitude*: the world is large and a mind is small.

So a **seam** opens between what a person must know and what he can check, and into that seam goes a proxy: a mark, a credential, an authority, an interpreter — someone you are trusting to have done the checking for you.

Sight is gone. Not degraded — *structurally* gone, and unrecoverable by any amount of effort or education, because no education makes one person capable of verifying everything.

Two — The Formal Version: Rational Ignorance

Economics arrived at the same place from a different direction, and the arrival is worth noting because it shows the finding is not merely an anthropological intuition.

In 1957 the economist **Anthony Downs** published *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, and in it introduced what became known as **rational ignorance**. His observation was that acquiring information is *costly* — it takes time, effort, and attention — while the benefit any single individual receives from being well informed about a collective decision is vanishingly small, since his own view will not, by itself, change the outcome.

As Downs put it:

> *"In our model, as in real life, political decisions are made when uncertainty exists and information is obtainable only at a cost. Thus a basic step towards understanding politics is analysis of the economics of being informed."*

The devastating implication is that **ignorance is not a failure of the citizen. It is a correct calculation.** It is rational, from where the individual stands, *not* to spend three hundred hours becoming competent to evaluate a monetary policy on which his opinion will have no measurable effect. He is behaving perfectly sensibly, and the aggregate result is a population that cannot see.

This is the seam, restated as a cost-benefit problem. And notice that it is *exactly* the position-logic result: the individual is doing the rational thing from his own position, and the aggregate consequence is a structure that nobody chose.

PART IV

The Second Leg: Strength

Now the part that was missing, and it turns out to be the one that most determines what happens after an exposure.

Suppose we solve the first problem entirely. Suppose the citizen *does* see — suppose the investigative journalists do their work, the documents leak, the fraud is proved, and the public learns, with certainty, that the institution has been captured.

Does the capture end?

The historical answer is: usually not. And the reason is that seeing and acting are different capacities, and scale destroyed the second one too — by three distinct mechanisms, each sufficient on its own.

One — Olson: The Free-Rider Problem

The foundational text is **Mancur Olson**'s *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965), and its finding is one of the most counterintuitive and important in the social sciences.

The naive assumption is that a group of people with a shared interest will *act* on that shared interest. Olson showed that this is generally **false for large groups**, and the reason is structural.

Consider a captured regulator that costs each of a hundred million citizens roughly $50 a year, and delivers a billion dollars a year to twenty firms. Now ask each party what it is rational to do:

- **Each of the twenty firms** has fifty million dollars a year riding on the arrangement. Of course they will organize. Of course they will lobby, litigate, and staff the agency. The return on their effort is enormous, and there are few enough of them that they can monitor each other and prevent shirking.
- **Each of the hundred million citizens** has $50 a year riding on it. Fighting the arrangement would cost him vastly more than $50 in time and effort. And here is the killer: **even if he wins, everyone else gets the benefit anyway.** His personal share of the victory is still $50. So the rational move for each individual is to **let someone else do it** — to *free-ride* on the effort of others.

And since everyone reasons this way, **nobody does it.**

This asymmetry has a standard name: **concentrated benefits and diffuse costs.** The party that gains a lot each organizes; the party that loses a little each does not. And the crucial point for us is that **this is not apathy, ignorance, or moral failure.** Every one of the hundred million is behaving rationally from his own position. The structure defeats them, not their character.

In a band of fifty, this problem does not exist. Your share of the benefit of stopping the upstart is one-fiftieth, not one-hundred-millionth. The cost of your contribution — a joke at his expense — is nearly zero. And your absence would be *noticed*. Free-riding on a coalition of fifty is not possible, because everyone can see who showed up.

Olson's problem is what happens to Boehm's coalition when you scale it.

Two — Chwe: You Must Know That Others Know

The second mechanism is subtler and, once seen, explains a great deal about why exposures fail.

The political scientist and game theorist **Michael Chwe**, in *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge* (2001), pointed out that coordinated action has a requirement that goes beyond mere information. It requires **common knowledge**.

The distinction is precise, and it matters enormously:

- **Private knowledge**: *I* know the institution is corrupt.
- **Mutual knowledge**: I know it, and *you* know it — but I don't necessarily know that you know it.
- **Common knowledge**: I know it, *and I know that you know it, and I know that you know that I know it*, and so on.

Why does this matter? Because, as Chwe puts it, in a coordination problem **"each person wants to participate only if others also participate."** The man who stands up against a powerful institution when nobody else stands up is not a hero; he is a casualty. He is fired, sued, blacklisted, ruined — and the institution is untouched. So each person's willingness to act depends *entirely* on his belief about whether others will act.

Which means that to move against a captor, it is not enough that everybody knows. **Everybody must know that everybody knows.**

Chwe's insight is that this is precisely what public rituals, ceremonies, and mass media *do*. They are not merely channels for transmitting information from a centre to individuals; they are **generators of common knowledge**, because when you watch a public broadcast, you know that others are watching the same thing at the same time, and that they know you are. That mutual visibility is what makes coordinated action thinkable.

And now look at the band. **In a group of fifty, common knowledge is free.** Everyone sees the same events. Everyone hears the same gossip. When the hunter swaggers, everyone witnesses it, and everyone knows everyone witnessed it. The joke at his expense is safe to make, because you know the others will laugh.

Scale destroys this. A hundred million people do not witness a common event. They each learn things privately, and they cannot be sure what others have learned, or believed, or are willing to do. The coalition that would be automatic among fifty is, among a hundred million, an enormous and fragile construction requiring institutions specifically built to create common knowledge — which is precisely what a free press *is*, and precisely why capturing or fragmenting the press is the most valuable single move available to a captor.

Three — Kuran: Everyone Knows, and Nobody Says

The third mechanism completes the picture, and it explains both why captured structures persist and why they sometimes collapse without warning.

The economist **Timur Kuran**, in *Private Truths, Public Lies* (1995), described what he called **preference falsification**: the pervasive tendency of people to misrepresent their true preferences in public when they believe those preferences are unpopular or dangerous.

The consequence, in Kuran's words, is that preference falsification produces:

> *"the preservation of widely disliked structures"*

and confers

> *"an aura of stability on structures vulnerable to sudden collapse."*

Unpack that. A regime, an institution, or an orthodoxy may be privately despised by an overwhelming majority — and yet appear rock-solid, because **each individual, seeing no one else object, concludes that he is alone, and stays silent.** His silence then becomes part of the evidence that convinces the next person that *he* is alone. The structure is held up by a false impression of its own support, which everyone is involuntarily helping to manufacture.

And then Kuran's second half, which is why revolutions surprise everyone including their participants:

> *"When the support of a policy, tradition, or regime is largely contrived, a minor event may activate a bandwagon that generates massive yet unanticipated change."*

Once *some* threshold of people speaks, others discover they were never alone, and the cascade runs. This is why the fall of an apparently invincible regime can look, in retrospect, like a house of cards — because it *was* one, and no one could see the cards from inside.

Preference falsification is the third amputation of the second leg. Even when the individual sees the capture (leg one restored) and even if he could bear the cost of acting (Olson's problem solved), **he still will not move, because he does not know that anyone will move with him** — and he has every reason, from where he stands, to keep his mouth shut.

PART V

One Cause, Two Deaths

It would be a weak argument if the two legs were destroyed by unrelated causes; the theory would then be two theories in a trench coat. They are not. **Both legs are destroyed by the same variable, and for a single underlying reason.**

The variable is **scale** — the number of people, and the complexity that comes with them.

And the underlying reason is that both legs, in the band, ran on the **same free resource: mutual visibility.**

- **Sight** was cheap because the world was small enough that you could *directly observe* the things that mattered — the hunter's success, the healer's results, the leader's conduct.
- **Strength** was cheap because *everyone else could observe them too, and you knew it*. That shared observation is exactly what made coalition automatic: no free-riding (your absence would be seen), no common-knowledge problem (everyone witnessed the same events), no preference falsification (you knew what your neighbours thought, because you heard them say it).

Mutual visibility was the substrate of both defences. And scale is precisely the thing that destroys mutual visibility — first by making the world too large to see, and then by making the *other people* too numerous to see, so that you no longer know what they know or what they will do.

This is why the two legs die together, and why they must be discussed together. **They are two functions of one lost thing.**

PART VI

Why Exposure Changes Almost Nothing

We can now state the paper's most practically important result, and it is a bitter one.

One — Exposure Restores Sight and Does Nothing for Strength

Every remedy that dominates public discussion — transparency, disclosure, investigative journalism, fact-checking, education, "raising awareness" — attacks **leg one only**.

They are attempts to make the population *see*.

And they largely work! We are, by any historical standard, an extraordinarily well-exposed society. The frauds are documented. The conflicts of interest are published. The corruptions are reported in detail, at length, by competent professionals.

And the structures do not move.

This is not a paradox and it is not a failure of the journalism. It is exactly what the two-leg model predicts. **Exposure supplies sight. It supplies no strength whatever.** The citizen who now knows precisely how he is being fleeced faces exactly the same Olson problem (his individual action is futile and costly), exactly the same Chwe problem (he does not know that others will move), and exactly the same Kuran problem (he does not know that others even agree). He has been given *vision* and no *limbs*.

Two — The Test Case: 2008

The cleanest demonstration available in living memory is the credit-rating agencies.

The facts were established comprehensively and publicly. The agencies — Moody's, Standard & Poor's — had been paid by the **issuers** of the very bonds they were rating, an arrangement whose conflict of interest requires no subtlety to see. They had stamped AAA on securities that were worthless. Structured-finance ratings had grown to over half of Moody's revenue by early 2007. The consequences were catastrophic and global.

And it was all *exposed*. Congressional hearings. The Financial Crisis Inquiry Report. Litigation, fines, front pages, documentaries. **Everyone saw.**

Now ask what happened to the mechanism.

The issuer-pays model persists to this day. The same handful of agencies remain, entrenched in part by the regulatory designations that made their ratings load-bearing in law. The conflict of interest that produced the disaster was *examined in public*, *understood by everyone*, and *left in place*.

Why? Because seeing it was never the binding constraint.

Dismantling it would have required a sustained coalition capable of overcoming a small, concentrated, extremely well-resourced set of interests with everything to lose — against a diffuse public with, individually, very little at stake and no mechanism for combining. **Olson's arithmetic, not the public's ignorance, is what saved the issuer-pays model.** The exposure was total, and it was not enough, because exposure is only half a weapon.

Three — Why the Captor Can Survive Being Seen

This has a chilling corollary for the captor's strategy, and it explains something the previous paper left unexplained.

The Custodian's Dilemma argued that a captor must preserve the appearance of the institution's integrity, because his prize is made of public trust. That is true — but the two-leg model tells us **exactly how much exposure he can survive**, and the answer is: *a great deal more than one would think.*

He can survive being **seen**. What he cannot survive is being seen **by a public capable of acting**.

And so the sophisticated captor's real defence is not concealment at all. It is the **maintenance of the public's incapacity**: keeping the costs diffuse and the benefits concentrated so Olson holds; keeping the public fragmented so

that common knowledge cannot form; and keeping the objectors isolated and unsure of one another so that preference falsification holds.

Which is why the most valuable thing a captor can capture is not the institution. It is the channels through which a coalition against him would have to form. Not because he fears being *known* — but because he fears the moment when everyone knows *that everyone knows*.

PART VII

The Threshold

If both legs are destroyed by scale, what precisely tips a society over the edge? The anthropological literature converges on a material answer, and it is worth stating because it dates the amputation.

Storage.

The anthropologist **James Woodburn**, in an influential 1982 paper on egalitarian societies, drew a distinction that has organized the field since. He separated **immediate-return** economies — where people hunt and gather and consume what they get, with little or no storage or accumulation — from **delayed-return** economies, where labour is invested now for a return later: crops in the ground, herds, stored grain, fish weirs, fixed structures.

Immediate-return societies are reliably egalitarian. Delayed-return societies are not. And the reason is not culture; it is the physics of what can be held.

In an immediate-return world, the leveling mechanisms are cheap and the exit option is real. You can walk away, because everything you own you carry. And there is nothing much to seize, because nothing accumulates.

Storage changes everything at once. A granary is a thing that can be *taken*, *defended*, *rationed*, and *withheld*. It creates a surplus, which can support people who do not produce food — which is to say, it creates the *possibility of specialists*, which is the beginning of the division of labour, which is the beginning of the division of knowing. And it makes exit expensive: you cannot walk away from a field you planted six months ago.

So storage kills both legs simultaneously, which is the neatest confirmation the thesis could ask for. It kills *sight*, by funding the specialists whose knowledge you cannot check. And it kills *strength*, by making the population sedentary, dense, and unable to leave — while creating, for the first time, a prize worth seizing and defending with force.

Boehm's own account of what ends the reverse dominance hierarchy names exactly these factors: **food surplus**, **population density** beyond the range of kin-based control, **specialization**, and **war**. Every one of them is downstream of storage.

The Neolithic did not merely change how humans ate. **It amputated both of the defences that had kept humans, for the overwhelming majority of their existence, structurally difficult to rule.**

PART VIII

The Prosthesis

Now the reframe, which is the constructive half of the paper.

One — The Reframe

If civilization amputated two limbs, then we should expect that every genuinely effective constraint on power in the historical record is an **artificial reconstruction of one or both of them.**

That is exactly what we find. And once you look at the great liberal institutions this way, something important becomes clear: **not one of them works by producing virtuous people.** Every single one works by *installing rivals whose interests conflict* — which is a mechanical reconstruction of the band's coalition, built out of self-interest rather than solidarity.

Two — The Sight Prostheses

Science. Science does not work because scientists are honest; scientists are as vain and ambitious as anyone. It works because *another laboratory gets a career out of proving you wrong*. Replication, peer review, adversarial refereeing, and the professional rewards for overturning a famous result are an artificial system for making verification **somebody's job and somebody's interest.** It is Boehm's levelling coalition, rebuilt for claims instead of for chieftains.

The adversarial court. A trial does not work because judges are wise. It works because two parties, each *paid* to destroy the other's case, are compelled to put their evidence before a decider — and each has every incentive to expose whatever the other is hiding. Discovery, cross-examination, and the rules of evidence are a machine for manufacturing sight *out of the conflict of interested parties*.

Double-entry bookkeeping, audit, disclosure, freedom of information. All the same species: mechanisms that make hiding expensive, by giving *somebody* an interest in looking.

Three — The Strength Prostheses

The vote. An election is, structurally, a coalition device with the cost per participant driven nearly to zero. It cannot solve Olson's problem in general, but it solves a very specific version of it: it lets a diffuse majority impose a sanction on a leader at a cost of about twenty minutes each. It is *shunning*, industrialized — and note that its ancestor, the band's ability to simply desert an overbearing leader, is precisely the capacity it reconstructs.

Unions, class actions, cooperatives, guilds. Every one of them is an *aggregation* device: a mechanism for taking a mass of individuals with diffuse costs and small individual stakes and combining them into a single actor with a concentrated stake — which is to say, a direct assault on Olson's asymmetry.

Elinor Ostrom's design principles. The political economist **Elinor Ostrom** won a Nobel Prize for demonstrating that communities *can*, in fact, solve collective-action problems around shared resources without either privatization or state coercion — but only under identifiable conditions. Her design principles include clearly defined boundaries, effective **monitoring** by people accountable to the group, **graduated sanctions** for violators, cheap conflict-resolution mechanisms, and nested layers for larger systems.

Read that list against Boehm's ladder of ridicule, gossip, shunning, and expulsion, and the correspondence is unmistakable. **Ostrom's design principles are a specification for artificially rebuilding the band's enforcement coalition in a world too large to have one for free.** She is describing the prosthesis, from the inside.

Four — The One That Does Both

And now the reason a free press occupies the position it does in every account of liberty — a position that always seems slightly disproportionate to its actual power, and now isn't.

The press is the only major institution that reconstructs both legs at once.

It restores **sight**, obviously: it investigates and reveals what the citizen cannot check himself.

But it also — and this is the underappreciated half — **generates common knowledge**, in exactly Chwe's sense. When something is on the front page, you do not merely learn it. **You learn that everyone else has learned it, and that they know you have.** That is the precise ingredient that Olson's arithmetic and Kuran's silence both require and neither can supply on its own. It is what makes the first objector believe he will not be standing alone.

Which explains, at last, why capturing the press is the highest-value move available to any would-be captor, and why it is always the first thing an aspiring autocrat reaches for — well before the courts, well before the legislature. **He is not primarily trying to keep the population ignorant.** He is trying to prevent the population from discovering *what it already collectively knows*.

Fragmentation achieves this as effectively as censorship, and more deniably. A public that has ten thousand private information streams may be extremely well informed and yet be *utterly incapable of common knowledge* — every individual knowing the truth, and no individual knowing that the others know it. That population has full sight and zero strength, and it can be governed against its own overwhelming preferences indefinitely.

PART IX

Why the Prosthesis Is Always Captured

There is no happy ending here, and it would be dishonest to manufacture one.

The prosthesis is itself a seam.

Every one of these institutions — science, the courts, the press, the regulator, the university, the audit — is a body of people who verify things on behalf of a public that cannot verify them itself. Which means every one of them is *a valuable, unmonitorable position*. Which means, per the argument developed in *The Custodian's Dilemma*, every one of them accumulates trust, and the trust becomes a yield, and the yield is noticed by everyone whose position lets them see it, and someone eventually takes it.

The organ becomes an office, and offices get occupied.

The scientific journal that existed to check claims becomes a gatekeeper worth capturing, and citation cartels and paper mills appear. The regulator built to constrain an industry is staffed from that industry. The press that generated common knowledge is bought, or captured by its own advertising and attention incentives. The audit firm is paid by the company it audits.

This is not a reason to abandon the project. **It is a reason to understand what kind of project it is.**

It is not construction. It is **maintenance**. There is no configuration of institutions that, once built correctly, stays built. Every prosthesis decays, on a schedule, by a mechanism we can now fully specify — and the work of every generation is to notice which of its inherited organs has been captured, and to rebuild or replace it.

The tragedy is not that we cannot win. **It is that we cannot win once.**

PART X

The Diagnostic

The practical yield of the two-leg model is a test, and it is blunt enough to apply to any proposed reform in about thirty seconds.

Ask of any remedy: does it restore SIGHT, does it restore STRENGTH, or does it restore both?

Most reforms restore only sight. **Those reforms will fail**, and the model tells you in advance that they will, and why.

Proposed remedy	Sight	Strength	Verdict
Disclosure requirements	✔	✘	Necessary, insufficient. Everyone will know and nothing will happen.
Investigative journalism	✔	partial	The "partial" is common-knowledge generation — which is why it matters more than mere disclosure.
Fact-checking, media literacy	✔	✘	Attacks leg one only. Will not move a captured structure.
Whistleblower protection	✔	✘	Improves supply of sight. Does nothing about capacity to act.
Class-action rights	✘	✔	Directly attacks Olson: aggregates diffuse claimants into a concentrated actor.
Adversarial audit (payer ≠ audited)	✔	✔	Rare and powerful: installs a rival with an interest in looking *and* the means to act.
Rotating / randomized officeholders	✘	✔	Attacks the captor's core investment — his relationships.
Antitrust / breaking up concentration	✘	✔	Attacks the concentrated side of Olson's asymmetry directly.
"Raising awareness"	✔	✘	The purest single-leg remedy, and the most reliably useless.

The general rule that falls out:

> ***Sight without strength produces a well-informed, impotent, and increasingly cynical population — which is the most stable configuration a captured structure can hope for.***

That sentence should be read twice by anyone who believes that exposure is a strategy. A population that knows exactly how it is being exploited, and knows equally well that it can do nothing about it, is not a threat to the arrangement. **It is a pillar of it** — because its cynicism is *demobilizing*, and demobilization is precisely what the captor requires.

PART XI

The Honest Ledger

Three things are true at once, and the temptation is always to collapse them into one.

It is not solvable. The seam is made of human finitude, and finitude is not negotiable. There is no arrangement of institutions, no technology, and no level of education that will make a person capable of verifying the world himself, or make a hundred million strangers coordinate as cheaply as fifty people around a fire. The Pleistocene limbs are gone and they are not growing back.

It is not stable. Every prosthesis we build becomes, by virtue of being trusted, a thing worth capturing — and is captured, on a schedule, by ordinary people doing what their position invites them to do. There is no institutional design that ends the game.

And it is not fixed. This is the part the pessimist gets wrong, and it matters. A person in 1400 could check essentially nothing and coordinate essentially nothing. A person today can check *some* things and coordinate *some* things — and the difference was not a gift. It was *built*, out of adversarial courts and replicated experiments and a press that could not be entirely bought and coalitions that could not be entirely bribed. Those were prostheses, and they worked, and they are the reason the dial sits where it sits.

The dial does not go to zero. It never has and it never will. But **it moves** — and the distance between a seam that is 90 percent parasitic and one that is 60 percent parasitic is, in human terms, the difference between a peasant and a citizen. That distance is most of what we mean by the word *liberty*, and it has never been anything but a maintained artifact, held open by effort against a structure that is always closing.

The band knew this. **That is the whole meaning of insulting the meat.** They understood that equality is not a state of nature to be enjoyed but an achievement to be *worked at*, continuously, forever, against a tendency that never sleeps. They mocked the hunter *every single time*, not because they had failed to solve the problem, but because they understood that it is not the kind of problem that gets solved.

Everything we have built since is an attempt to keep doing that at a scale where it no longer comes free.

Coda: The New Seam

One final observation, offered because a framework that cannot see its own instrument is not to be trusted.

The reader of this paper has just been supplied with a great deal of information he did not verify. He did not read Boehm, or Olson, or Chwe, or Kuran. He is trusting this document — and, behind it, an AI system that read the sources and reported what they said.

That is a seam. It is a new one, it is very wide, and it is extraordinarily convenient — which is precisely the profile of the positions that get captured.

Whatever such systems turn out to be, the framework's prediction is unambiguous and requires no villain: *if they become genuinely trusted, they become worth capturing, and the people best positioned to notice this will be exactly those standing where the value is visible.* The trust will become a yield. The yield will be discovered — not by a cabal, but by everyone whose position lets them see it. And the resulting contest will be defended, throughout, by people sincerely committed to the integrity of the thing they are consuming.

This is not a prophecy. It is the same arithmetic this project has traced through the Rialto, the Stationers' Company, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and the medical licensing boards.

The office is new. The office is always new. It is the same office.

Held, as everything in this project is held, as **tested, not revealed**.

Sources and Further Reading

Every quotation is verified to a published source; none is invented.

On the reverse dominance hierarchy and forager egalitarianism. Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* (Harvard University Press, 1999), and "Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy," *Current Anthropology* 34 (1993), for the central concept and the cross-cultural survey of egalitarian societies; see also his *Moral Origins* (2012). The characterization of reverse dominance — that in a standard dominance hierarchy a few dominate the many, whereas foragers achieve the inversion, with the many acting in concert to suppress any individual who attempts to dominate — follows Boehm as summarized in the anthropological literature. The graduated ladder of sanctions (ridicule, gossip, shunning, desertion, and in extremis execution by a group-sanctioned executioner) follows the same sources.

On "insulting the meat." Richard B. Lee, "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari," *Natural History* (1969), and his subsequent ethnographic work on the Dobe Ju/'hoansi (!Kung). The quoted explanation given to Lee — that when a young man kills much meat he comes to think of himself as a chief or big man and of the rest as his servants, and that this cannot be accepted — is quoted as reproduced in the teaching and secondary literature on Lee's fieldwork. On leveling mechanisms generally, see also James Woodburn, "Egalitarian Societies," *Man* 17:3 (1982).

On the material threshold. James Woodburn's distinction between **immediate-return** and **delayed-return** economies, from "Egalitarian Societies" (1982), is the standard reference for why storage and delayed yield are associated with the collapse of egalitarian arrangements. Boehm's own account of what ends reverse dominance — food surplus, population density beyond kin-based control, specialization, and warfare — follows *Hierarchy in the Forest*. For fuller treatments of the emergence of inequality, see Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality* (Harvard, 2012).

On rational ignorance. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Harper & Row, 1957). The quoted passage — "In our model, as in real life, political decisions are made when uncertainty exists and information is obtainable only at a cost. Thus a basic step towards understanding politics is analysis of the economics of being informed" — is from that work and is widely reproduced in the political-economy literature.

On collective action. Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Harvard University Press, 1965), for the free-rider problem and the demonstration that large groups with shared interests routinely fail to organize; the "concentrated benefits, diffuse costs" formulation is the standard summary of the resulting asymmetry and is central to the public-choice literature.

On common knowledge. Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge* (Princeton University Press, 2001). The quoted principle — that in order to coordinate, "each person wants to participate only if others also participate," and that members must therefore have "knowledge of each other, knowledge of that knowledge, knowledge of the knowledge of that knowledge, and so on" — is Chwe's core statement of the common-knowledge requirement. His argument that public rituals and mass media are powerful because they let audience members know what other members know is the source of this paper's treatment of the press as a common-knowledge generator.

On preference falsification. Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Harvard University Press, 1995). The quoted consequences — the "preservation of widely disliked structures," the conferral of "an aura of stability on structures vulnerable to sudden collapse," and the observation that where support is "largely contrived, a minor event may activate a bandwagon that generates massive yet unanticipated change" — are Kuran's own summary of his thesis.

On rebuilt coalitions. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), for the design principles — including clearly defined boundaries, monitoring by accountable monitors, graduated sanctions, low-cost conflict resolution, and nested enterprises — under which groups

successfully self-govern common-pool resources without privatization or external coercion. Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009.

On the credit-rating case. The issuer-pays model, the practice of ratings shopping, the growth of structured finance to over half of Moody's revenue by the first quarter of 2007, the regulatory entrenchment of the major agencies through NRSRO designation, and the persistence of the issuer-pays model after the crisis, follow the Brookings Institution's analysis of credit rating agency reform, the Congressional Research Service backgrounder, and the *Financial Crisis Inquiry Report* (2011).

Contested matters are flagged as such. The degree of egalitarianism among forager societies varies considerably, and gender egalitarianism in particular is highly variable and should not be overstated; the claim advanced here is only about the absence of *institutionalized political hierarchy and a permanent extractive elite*, which is well supported. The precise causal weight of storage versus population density versus warfare in the emergence of inequality remains an active scholarly dispute, and the argument here rests only on the settled point that these material conditions, and not a change in human nature, mark the threshold.

A working paper of the **Patterns of Power** *project. Companion to* The Necessary Seam, The Exploit, *and* The Custodian's Dilemma.

Tested, not revealed.